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WOODCOCK HUNTING IS SPOTTY IN EARLY SEASON

Early frosts in some areas and drought and near-drought conditions made woodcock hunting very spotty over most of the northern shooting areas during the early days of the season, according to reports received from field personnel by Albert M. Day, Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service.

The woodcock--the only shorebird still left on the shooting list for American hunters--is highly prized as a game bird in the eastern part of the country. Familiarly known to hunters as the "Timberdoodle," the woodcock nests from southern Canada southward, and concentrates in winter along the Gulf Coast, chiefly in Louisiana and southwestern Mississippi.

In Minnesota, in the Hinckley-Sandstone area, Service biologists report that signs indicate an extremely heavy flight of these birds had been in the area from September 15 to 20 but were well on their way to the South by October 1, the opening date of the shooting season. A cold snap in mid-September, followed by hot, dry, windy weather, shoved most of the birds out. During the first three days of the season, only a few birds were left in the alders and aspen to be bagged by hunters.

In northern Wisconsin the same conditions prevailed. As the result of a mild cold front that headed in toward Wisconsin on October 4 and 5, quite a few birds moved in from the north. Although coverts were very dry in central Wisconsin as late as October 9, good concentrations of birds were observed in several areas.

Northern Michigan was also dry. Reports indicated, however, that shooting during the first few opening days was fair and better than in Minnesota and Wisconsin. As late as October 11-16, it was not difficult to flush 20 birds a day.

In Pennsylvania the season opened on October 15 with shooting conditions labeled as "spotty." Many shooting coverts were extremely dry and undesirable for holding woodcock. Some hunters reported bagging the limit of 4 birds easily while others saw but few birds. Because of this abnormally dry condition through August, Service observers believe that many local birds moved on to the South or to areas not generally available or attractive to hunters.

In eastern Maine reports state that hunting conditions for woodcock have been poorer than average to date because of near-drought conditions during much of the summer. Many of the usual good shooting coverts, such as alder, birch knolls, and old fields, had but few birds the first two weeks of the season, which opened on October 1. Many coverts in northern Maine, by contrast, appear to have excellent population of birds. The drought was not so severe in this area.

Southern New Brunswick, like eastern Maine, suffered from a very dry summer. Shooting conditions have been poor with few birds present in spite of an excellent local hatch in May. Western New Brunswick reports better weather conditions and consequently better shooting.

Reports from southern and central Vermont state that woodcock are scattered but abundant and easier to find than in 1951. The season opened on October 1 and the weather was relatively clear until October 19. On that date rain and north-east winds arrived, followed by heavy frosts. This caused the birds to move out.

Reports from southern and central New Hampshire were relatively the same, with one light flight observed on October 12.

From Massachusetts, where the season opened on October 20, came a report of a heavy flight of woodcock on Martha's Vineyard Island. Heavy flights are expected in the central part of the State this week.

Service observers reported that good strong flights of birds moved out of the Lake States before the season opened. Additional rainfall and colder weather, however, may bring more of the Canadian birds down for better shooting before the season is over. In general, conditions in the northeast have been similar in many respects to those in the midwest. Rain, along with colder weather, is needed to bring down the birds which may still be in the Maritimes so that hunters in the eastern States will have better shooting before the season ends.

The woodcock has long been known as the mystery game bird of the eastern United States because it has defied efforts of scientists who attempted to learn details of its life history, seasonal movements, and migration routes. Within the past decade, investigators of the Maine, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts Cooperative Wildlife Research Units have devised banding, censusing, and other techniques that are now answering some of the questions which have puzzled observers for years.

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